

# Sassoon, Whose Metres Are Sword Blades

It is probable that American poets have written as many poems of the great war as English poets have written, although we have more recently entered the conflict. But thoughtful readers will find it interesting to compare American poetry of the war with English poetry on the same subject.

Our poets have sung of love for their country, for France and England, for the democracy for which we fight. In their verses we read of the sword, the shield and the other old symbols of warfare. They refer frequently to historical personages and especially to Jeanne d'Arc. Their verse is symbolic, idealistic and eloquent of the courage that longs to be tested.

## Poetry Stark and True.

The English poets, however, are not writing about the imagined moods of warfare. They have found the stark truth of battle. What we have read and heard and imagined they know by actual experience. They say little about "swords"

and little about historical personages. They write about "frowsty dugouts," "crumps" and "flares." Realism, irony, severity, very rough laughter and wistful wonder, all these come to us in poems from across the seas.

Of the younger Englishmen, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson has written the best realistic poetry of the great war of which we have known hitherto. But Siegfried Sassoon, who hates war almost as much as he loves England, and who has done his part on the field of honor, has written war poems that compare favorably with Mr. Gibson's best work. They are published in his first book of verse, *The Old Huntsman*, dedicated to Thomas Hardy.

As craftsmen, Mr. Gibson and Mr. Sassoon have much in common. Both are poets of the modern or Georgian type. They use a plainer diction, freer rhythms and more democratic themes than those which appealed to their predecessors, the post-Victorians. But Mr. Gibson is content to present his pictures and tell his stories with a certain aloofness and de-

tachment. Mr. Sassoon is closer spiritually to every one of his stories and poems and more personal in his method.

What irony, for example, could have a keener edge than that in the poem called *The Kiss*, which prays for insensate rage to make the deeds of battle bearable to the sensitive man?

To these I turn, in these I trust:  
Brother Lead and Sister Steel.  
To his blind power I make appeal;  
I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,  
And splits a skull to win my praise;  
But up the nobly marching days  
She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:  
That in good fury he may feel  
The body where he sets his heel  
Quail from your downward darting kiss!

## The Candor of Courage.

Terrible as such poems are, there is something noble in the intellectual honesty that will cast no glamour over the thing that must be done, not because it is beautiful, but because it is necessary. And this same uncompromising bitterness

makes many another poem strong. Among the best of them are *Golgotha*, *When I'm Among a Blaze of Lights*, *A Mystic as a Soldier*, *The Redeemer*, *A Whispered Tale*, *Blighters* and *At Carnoy*. But many readers prefer the greater serenity of a poem like *Absolution*:

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes  
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.  
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,  
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,  
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.

We are the happy legion, for we know  
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

*The Old Huntsman*, the title poem of the book, is an excellent and interesting piece of work. And Mr. Sassoon's talent is made evident in many a brilliant line of clean, strong poetry. But it is for the war poems that his present volume will be read and remembered.

THE OLD HUNTSMAN. By SIEGFRIED SASSOON. E. P. Dutton & Co. \$2.

## A Poet of New York

ELIAS LIEBERMAN is characteristically a poet of New York. His book of poems, *Paved Streets*, could hardly have been written in any other American city; it could hardly have been written by a man who was not a typical product of New York education and New York influences plus the quickened vision, sympathy and yearning that a man of foreign ancestry brings to his appreciation of things American.

From the first poem in the book, *I Am an American*, to the poems on the war with which he closes his volume the note of self-conscious, idealistic Americanism is sounded—the Americanism that looks to the future and finds in the most squalid surroundings the most hopeful promise of his country's destiny.

Lieberman's poems are impregnated with the spirit of democracy and the poetry in common things; the shoemaker dreams and quests, he says, just as truly as the knights of old dreamed and sought their Holy Grail; there is as much magic and mystery in our own city as there was in any storied city in Araby.

He meets Wonder and Youth on a Fifth Avenue bus and travels on with them happily; he finds the pursuit of pleasure at Coney Island as romantic as the quest of the Golden Fleece by Jason; he finds a lovely and wistful Spring whispering even in the fish market under the Williamsburg Bridge.

It may be said that Lieberman never touches a very high point of poetic inspiration; he never is entirely swept off the earth in a pulse of song that knows no denying. One is a little too conscious of his technique—of effects too carefully planned—of a poem written because the occasion demanded it. One finds it hard to quote any one poem that is overwhelmingly beautiful—though none are uninteresting. Most of the things he says have been said before, and said much better by such men as Louis Untermeyer, James Oppenheim, John Hall Wheelock.

The second part of the poem *I Am an American* expresses the poet's message as well as anything in the book:

I am an American,  
My father was an atom of dust,  
My mother a straw in the wind,  
To His Serene Majesty.  
One of my ancestors died in the mines of Siberia,  
Another was crippled for life by twenty blows of the knout;  
The history of my ancestors is a trail of blood  
To the palace gate of the Great White Czar.  
But then the dream came—  
The dream of America.  
In the light of the Liberty Torch  
The atom of dust became a man  
And the straw in the wind became a woman  
For the first time.  
"See," said my father, pointing to the flag that fluttered near,  
"That flag of stars and stripes is yours;  
It is the emblem of the promised land.  
It means, my son, the hope of humanity.  
Live for it—die for it!"  
Under the open sky of my new country I  
Swore to do so;  
And every drop of blood in me will keep  
That vow.  
I am proud of my future.  
I am an American.

PAVED STREETS. By ELIAS LIEBERMAN. The Cornhill Co. \$1.25.

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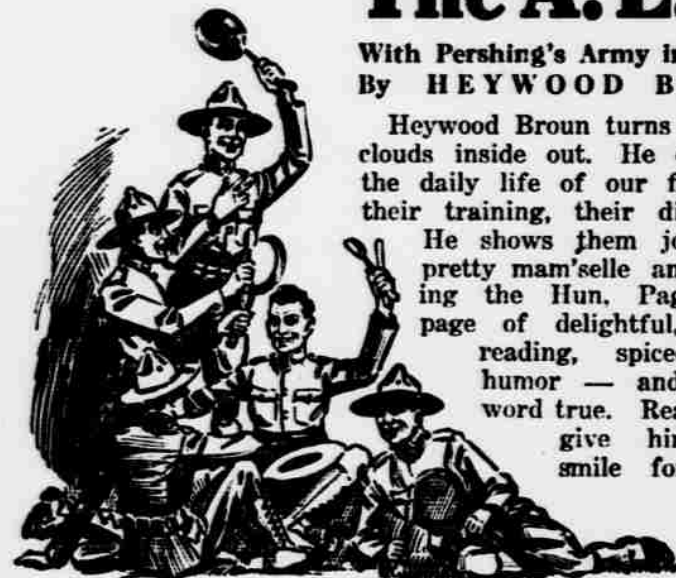


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